

2023-24 Major Review of Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL)

FAQs

What is the ASCL?

The scope of the Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL) allows for all languages. In practice, only those languages widely spoken are made visible as a separate category in the classification. As languages become more prevalent in Australia, they can be added to the classification to support the ongoing measurement of diversity and changes in languages spoken in Australia.

The ASCL is designed to be used in the collection, aggregation and dissemination of data relating to languages spoken in Australia and to classify the language(s) spoken at home variables contained within the [Language Standards](#).

How is the 2016 Classification structured?

The current ASCL (2016) has a three-level hierarchical structure that consists of Broad groups, Narrow groups and Languages.

Broad group level

The Broad group level (one-digit code) is the highest and most general level of the current classification. Broad groups are formed by aggregating Narrow groups containing Languages that originated in similar geographical areas. The current ASCL has nine Broad groups:

1. Northern European languages
2. Southern European languages
3. Eastern European languages
4. Southwest and Central Asian languages
5. Southern Asian languages
6. Southeast Asian languages
7. Eastern Asian languages
8. Australian Indigenous languages
9. Other languages

Narrow group level

The second level of the current classification are Narrow groups. These are represented by two-digit or three-digit codes. The current ASCL contains 51 two-digit Narrow groups and 13 three-digit Narrow groups, similar in terms of the classification criteria (*genetic affinity*, evolution from a common ancestral language, and *geographic proximity*, the area in which a language originated). Narrow groups are composed of one or more Languages (four-digit level).

Australian Indigenous Languages (Broad group 8) is the only Broad group that contains both two- and three-digit Narrow groups. The remainder of the classification contains only two-digit Narrow groups. The three Narrow groups in Broad group 8 divided into 3-digit categories are:

- 81 Arnhem Land and Daly River Region Languages
- 82 Yolngu Matha
- 86 Arandic

Languages

The third and most detailed level of the current classification consists of 435 Languages (4-digit codes), including 217 Australian Indigenous Languages. Examples of the hierarchy in the classification is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Representation of Northern European languages in the 2016 ASCL

Broad Group	Narrow Group	Languages
1 Northern European Languages	11 Celtic	
		1101 Gaelic (Scotland)
		1102 Irish
		1103 Welsh
		1199 Celtic, nec

Table 2: Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in the 2016 ASCL

Broad Group	Narrow Groups	Languages
8 Australian Indigenous languages	82 Yolngu Matha	
	821 Dhangu	
		8211 Galpu
		8212 Golumala
		8213 Wangurri
		8219 Dhangu, nec

How will the proposed 2025 ASCL be structured?

The proposed structure of the 2025 version of the ASCL has a four-level hierarchy across the entire classification, consisting of Language family group, Sub family group, Narrow group, and Languages.

Language family group level

The proposed Language family group level (two-digit code) is the first and broadest level of the classification. These Language family groups have been formed by aggregating closely related Sub family groups. These languages are those which have evolved from a common ancestral language (genetic affinity). The proposed classification has 16 Language family groups:

11. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages
12. Creoles and Pidgins
13. Indo-European Languages
14. Uralic Languages
15. Afro-Asiatic Languages
16. Turkic Languages
17. Niger-Congo Languages
18. Nilo-Saharan Languages
21. Dravidian Languages
22. Language isolates

- 23. Sino-Tibetan Languages
- 24. Hmong-Mien Languages
- 25. Austro-Asiatic Languages
- 26. Kra-Dai Languages
- 27. Austronesian Languages
- 91. Other Languages

Sub family group level

The second level of the proposed classification are the Sub family groups (four-digit codes). The proposed classification contains 51 Sub family groups, created by aggregating the most closely related Narrow groups. Within each Sub family group, Narrow groups are ordered by the similarity of the location where the Languages originated (geographic proximity).

Narrow Group level

The third level of the proposed classification are the Narrow groups (six-digit codes). The proposed classification contains 97 Narrow groups, created by aggregating the most closely related Languages. Within Narrow groups, Language groups have been organised alphabetically.

Languages

The fourth and most detailed level of the proposed classification consists of 435 Languages (eight-digit codes), including 204 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. Examples of the hierarchy in the classification are provided in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: The hierarchy for Languages in the Insular Languages Narrow group in the proposed 2025 ASCL

Family Group	Sub-family Group	Narrow Group	Languages
13 Indo-European Languages	1311 Celtic Languages	131111 Insular Languages	13111111 Gaelic (Scotland)
			13111112 Irish
			13111113 Welsh
			13111199 Insular Languages, nec

Table 4: The hierarchy for Languages in the Thura-Yura Languages Narrow Group in the proposed 2025 ASCL

Family Group	Sub-family Group	Narrow Group	Languages
11 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages	1111 Pama-Nyungan Languages	111111 Thura-Yura Languages	11111111 Adnyamathanha
			11111112 Barngarla
			11111113 Kaurna
			11111114 Narungga

	11111115 Nukunu
	11111211 Antikarinya

How is a Language defined?

There are many different ways people define language. In both the current (2016) and proposed (2025) versions of the ASCL, the official definition from the Macquarie Dictionary is used. That is, a language is a distinctly human way of communicating using voice, writing or sign language that is understood by others. Computer coding languages are excluded from the ASCL.

What is a language family?

A language family is a group of related languages which have evolved from a common ancestral language and share common linguistic features (such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar).

What is a variation?

In the proposed (2025) ASCL, a variation is defined as a regional or social variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, and/or vocabulary from its parent language. In the current (2016) and previous versions of the ASCL, a variation was referred to as a dialect. In the proposed classification, some variations have been individually specified within the ASCL, based on user needs; however, where possible, variations have been linked to their parent Language.

What is a Pidgin?

In both the current (2016) and proposed (2025) ASCL, a pidgin is defined as a language used for communication between groups having different first languages, as between European traders and Indigenous peoples, and which typically has derived features from each of those languages.

What is a Creole?

In both the current (2016) and proposed (2025) ASCL, a creole is defined as a language which has developed from a pidgin to become the primary language of a community.

What are the Language Standards?

The [ABS Language Standards](#) outline methods for collecting, processing and presenting data on languages spoken in Australia. There are five Language Standards in total:

1. First Language Spoken
2. Languages Spoken at Home
3. Main Language Other Than English Spoken at Home
4. Main Language Spoken at Home, and
5. Proficiency in Spoken English.

The ABS Language Standards can be used alone and are also part of the wider framework, [ABS Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity](#) (SSCLD). The Standards have been designed and developed by the ABS in collaboration with other organisations to support a nationally consistent approach for the collection and dissemination of data on cultural and language

diversity. The Standards used by ABS Census of Population and Housing: *Main Language Other Than English Spoken at Home* and *Proficiency in Spoken English* are part of the Minimum Core Set of Cultural and Language Indicators.

Why does the ASCL need to be updated?

While the current version of the ASCL had some minor updates in 2011 and 2016, it largely reflects the social environment in Australia at that time it was originally developed (1997). The Australian community has changed considerably over this time and the ASCL needs to be reviewed to reflect this. The ABS has also received feedback from individuals and organisations identifying areas that need to be revised. Data from the 2011, 2016 and 2021 Censuses have informed the review.

How were the proposed changes determined?

The proposed changes to the ASCL have been developed based on consultation with stakeholders to date, analysis of 2011, 2016, and 2021 Census data, research; and the classification criteria ([Australian Standard Classification of Languages, 2016 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)).

The proposed changes to the ASCL structure have been informed by [Ethnologue, Languages of the World](#). [AustLang](#) has also been referenced for information relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, variations and family groupings.

The proposed changes to the ASCL structure bring this classification more in line with the language classifications used by StatsNZ and Statistics Canada, improving international comparisons for languages (outside of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages).

What are the ASCL classification criteria?

Classification criteria are the principles by which categories are aggregated to form broader categories within a classification. The classification criteria used in ASCL are:

- the relationship between languages as a result of their evolution from a common ancestral language (genetic affinity).
- the area in which a language originated (geographic proximity). This also refers to the area where a language was first acknowledged as a distinct entity.

For further information, please view the 'Classification criteria and their application' section in the following link, [classification criteria](#).

What is the impact on official statistics?

When there are changes to a classification, data produced using that classification may not be directly comparable over time. The ABS provides concordance files and supporting documentation to make sure you can understand how changes to the classification will impact data produced from one point in time to another.

This round of public consultation outlines the proposed changes to the ASCL. This consultation process will provide an opportunity for individuals and organisations to provide feedback on the proposed changes before they are implemented.

How do I provide feedback?

You can provide feedback by making a submission via the [ABS Consultation Hub](#).

Any further questions?

Please email standards@abs.gov.au with any questions on this consultation or for further information.

How will the information in my submission be used?

The information you provide in your submission will be used to inform the review and preparation for the 2026 Census. More information about how ABS manages privacy can be found here [Privacy at the ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

What happens after the ABS Consultation Hub closes?

After the ABS Consultation Hub closes, all submissions will be reviewed. The ABS may contact submission authors for more information if they have agreed to be contacted. The ABS will publish the outcome of the consultation on the Consultation Hub via 'We Asked, You Said, We Did', in early 2025. The ABS will publish the updated ASCL in March 2025.